

District H by ThisGorlie

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Action/Adventure, Eventual Romance, F/M, Fluff, Friendship, Homophobia, Inspired by The Hunger Games, Lumax, M/M, Period-Typical Homophobia, Takes place in 1985 Hawkins, Violence, byler, the gang don't meet eleven 'till this year in this AU

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Summary:

Ever since 1975, the town of Hawkins annually hosts a game in which thirty Tributes between the ages of 14 to 21 are randomly selected from five cities of Indiana and the town of Hawkins to participate in a game where each Tribute is forced to kill each other until one remains. What happens when Will Byers and Mike Wheeler are among five of the Tributes to be selected in Hawkins? These thirty Tributes are left to fend for themselves with little outside help...not until Dustin and Lucas, with the help of a girl with psionic abilities, seek to destroy Hawkins Laboratory from the inside out.

1. The Day of the Reaping

Will Byers peered out of his bedroom door, making sure not to make the doorway creak as he slowly opened it. It didn't help that it was very quiet in the small home he resided in. From across the hallway, he could see his mother, Joyce, and his older brother, Jonathan, quietly preparing breakfast. The only sound he could hear were the clinks of the glassware and ceramics being placed onto the dining room table. Usually, it wasn't too loud around this time of day as Will lived in a 3 person household and mornings were usually hectic with Joyce and Jonathan getting ready for work while Will got ready for an 8 hour day of school. However, it was never this quiet.

He knew exactly why.

Today was the day where the annual 'Hunger Games' were to begin. Will had experienced the yearly apprehension leading up to this day and the day itself as thirty people from the town of Hawkins and several cities in Indiana between the ages of 14 to 21 were randomly selected to participate in this "game". He and the entirety of Indiana were very well aware of the gist of the game so they had every reason to be quiet and apprehensive this morning.

To make matters worse, Will was eligible to be selected for the first time as he turned 14 earlier this year.

Will opened the door some more before he quietly came out of his bedroom. He promised to himself he wouldn't let his nerves get the better of him, but the promise he made to himself was broken the minute he woke up.

Without saying good morning to his mother or brother to make his presence aware to them, he pulled out a chair from the table. The scraping noise the seat made against the floor startled Joyce.

"Sorry mom," Will mumbled as he took a seat.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Will? Stop apologizing so much," She replied, rather tight-lipped. She thought she would have kicked that habit out of her son ages ago, but it persisted. She

guessed it was Will's nature to be that way, but it often got him in situations where he apologized when he simply didn't need to, even when he was in the right. It allowed people to take advantage of his vulnerable personality.

When Will was about to blurt out another 'sorry', habitually from the tone of voice his mother was using, he immediately stopped himself from doing that.

"You want scrambled eggs with your toast?" Jonathan spoke up, trying his best to break the tension. He removed a skillet full of scrambled eggs from the stove and poured the contents onto a plate beside him.

Will looked down at his bare plate before looking up at Jonathan.

"...Actually, I'm not really hungry today," Will said, immediately regretting his decision to come to the table. However, he didn't want to keep himself in his room the entire day before he and his brother would be called Downtown to be potentially picked as 'tributes' (or rather forced participants) of the game. Although there was a really low chance of him getting picked out of hundreds of people in Hawkins, he was still as anxious as ever and wanted to spend as much time as he could with them both in case he and/or his brother were called.

"You have to eat something," Jonathan urged, seeing how distressed Will looked, "This day will be over before you know it."

That was when Joyce slammed a kettle she was carrying on the kitchen counter. Jonathan and Will looked her way, clearly disturbed by the sudden noise.

"How can you say that?" Joyce said, clearly shaken by what she thought was detachment from the situation at hand, "Jonathan don't you realize five innocent people from here are going die even if you or Will aren't called?"

"I-I didn't mean it that way," Jonathan stuttered, shaken at his mother's voice. She had been clearly suppressing her anger all morning.

“How else am I supposed to take what you just said?” Joyce continued, shakiness in her voice - she wasn’t backing down, “What happened to you? I’ve never seen you once complain about how fucked up all of this is! It’s as if you come to accept that this just happens...that it’s just another day we can get through and go back to living our lives as if this is a minor problem we can brush off, until the next year comes.”

Jonathan was clearly hurt at what his mother just said.

“I’m only acting this way because we can’t afford to break down, especially at this point!” Jonathan exclaimed, “And I do care, I care a lot that our government is able to get away with all of this!”

Will sunk down in his seat. His nerves were getting worse by the second.

“Besides I don’t want to send Will into a state of panic, especially since this is his first time he has a chance to be called,” Jonathan continued.

Will bit his lip; it was then he realized his brother too wasn’t making things any better when he uttered that last statement.

It was quiet for a moment, the tension even worse than it was before.

After a few minutes of silence, the static of Will’s CB radio walkie-talkie broke it. He immediately got out of his seat and went to the living room where he left it last night to answer it. He could vaguely hear his best-friend, Mike Wheeler, on the other end before picking it up.

“Hey, Mike; what’s up?” Will said, trying his best to sound normal.

On the other end, Mike could easily sense the uneasy tone in his friend’s voice. Mike wasn’t particularly good at reading the subtlety of people’s emotions, but Will’s was strangely easy to read.

However he ignored this and pressed the side button to answer, “Come meet me at the quarry.”

Mike stood on his his bike on the driveway of his generously sized

house. He waited for Will to answer.

“N-now?” His voice sounded shaky.

From Will’s end, the brown haired 14 year-old briefly looked back to see Jonathan seated at the kitchen table as Joyce faced away from him on the counter lighting up a cigarette.

“Are you busy? Cause I can come wait at your place-”

Will pressed the button and quickly spoke, interrupting his friend, “No, I’m not. I can come.”

“Ok, good. Lucas and Dustin are coming too, we have a lot we need to say.”

Once Will confirmed what time he was going to be there, he wondered why Mike would come wait for him at his house when he could easily wait at the quarry with Dustin and Lucas...not that he didn’t mind. He was thankful he had a friend like Mike who often looked out for him, extremely thankful. His mood was slightly elevated at this fact until he looked towards the direction of the kitchen. He had to see if his mother was okay with him leaving at a time like this.

“Hey Mom, my friends wanted me to meet up with them...if that’s okay with you,” Will spoke up, he cursed himself for saying those last five words. He had to sound more persistent to get his way, especially since he told Mike he was going to come. He didn’t want to disappoint him.

“You know they’re going to call us at noon-”

“Please? I promise I’ll be back before then,” Will interrupted, “I’m just...really worried about all of this and Mik- my friends might make me feel a little less nervous.”

Joyce sighed.

“You have to be back by 11:30, but please eat something before you go.”

Will nodded, immediately taking a spoon to collect the scrambled eggs that Jonathan placed on the table onto his empty plate.

Since he and his three best friends of the same age were all of the age to be called to be a part of the game, he knew exactly what was in store for him once he arrived to Sattler quarry.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wew, I'm so proud of this chapter! It took much longer than I thought to finish it since I did it all in one go. I really hope you all enjoyed this and I'll update soon! (I'd love some feedback too since this is my first ever ST Fic - and whether or not I should make my chapters longer or keep them at this length)

P.S: I'm trying to create Hungergames-esque version of Hawkins, Indiana rather than incorporate the characters alone in a Hunger Games setting completely devoid of elements from ST. ...So I'm REALLY excited to write the upcoming chapters of this fic. The whole Hawkins Laboratory/Department of Energy/MK-Ultra will play a huge part as to why these "games" are a thing too.

also P.S: This is primarily a Byler fic with Lumax

2. The Conspiracy

Mike Wheeler pressed the brakes on his bike once he reached the edge of the quarry. He was the first to come and now he had to wait for the others, probably the longest for Dustin. Dustin kept badgering him on why they had to meet at Sattler quarry of all places instead of his basement where the four had always met up when they had something important to discuss. Mike gave him dismissive answers as he didn't want to delve into the argument he just had with his parents. He wanted to be far away from them right now, so his house was off-limits.

He looked below the edge and saw the familiar 100 foot drop that led to the body of water.

He was suddenly reminded of last year – when one of the chosen tributes managed to escape after being called. He ran over to this exact quarry and leapt off of it before approaching his death. What got Mike the most was the guy knew he was most likely going to die the minute he got called – even if he had a chance, a rather slim one, to win the game and come back home alive. Mike remembered Lucas adding that the guy would rather die by his own accord than by a game sanctioned by the ‘corrupt government’. It was something he always thought about.

“Mike!”

Mike immediately snapped out of his thoughts, taking his eyes off of the bottom of the quarry. He saw Will on his bike, peddling at a quick speed towards him. Will's eyes widened once he came to the realization that he was going to crash into poor Mike since he was going so fast.

Will quickly swerved his bike away as he pressed on the brakes to prevent hitting Mike; the sudden impact caused him to trip sideways, his bike landing on him. That was when Mike ran over to Will and took his bike off of him.

“Are you okay??” Mike exclaimed, a little too worried for his liking, “Why were you riding so fast?”

“Sorry-” Will stopped himself, grabbing onto Mike’s hand so the taller could pull him up. Mike used his other hand to grab his shoulder so his friend could quickly get on his feet.

“My mom made me eat breakfast before I could come here so I thought I came later than everyone else.”

“You’re fine; you came right on time,” Mike reassured his friend. He instinctively checked for any bruises that Will might have gotten from that fall, prompting a flustered Will to insist that he was okay.

“How is she taking it?” Mike asked, changing the subject.

“My mom?” Will responded, having an idea of what Mike was trying to ask, “She got into a fight with my brother...she thinks my brother doesn’t care anymore about what Hawkins is doing as long as neither of us aren’t chosen as tributes.”

“Does he?”

“Of course he does!” Will said in a sudden defensive tone. He didn’t know what came over him, he assumed it had to do with the fact that he thought his mother was being unreasonable, “He...he just has a different way of showing it. He’s nowhere near as emotionally expressive as my mom is, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t care.”

“The same can’t be said for my parents,” Mike said, “This morning my dad literally said that we have nothing to worry about since ‘they choose five out of hundreds once a year’.”

“...and this was after I told them that this is the first year I could get picked. They don’t care and they never did. I hate to say this but I feel like Nancy and I are the only reasonable ones in that house.”

Will looked up at Mike. His friend was clearly angry, but trying his best not to take his frustrations out on him. He wasn’t too surprised at how Mike’s parents dealt with this entire predicament – particularly the control the Hawkins Laboratory – a branch of the Department of Energy – had on the government. His parents were the type to place blind trust in all that the government did; they often said that the government ultimately had everyone’s best interests no

matter what they did to get their way.

Mike's father once said 'conflict easily finds us if we aggressively meddle in our government's affairs; we're doing our service as patriots by not meddling in those'.

Mike on the other hand knew it was easy for people to find solace in that statement if they weren't even aware of what their own government was doing behind closed curtains in the first place. Luckily, his friends shared that same sentiment.

"Hey Mike," Will began; he hesitated, trying to find the best words to use for what he was about to say.

"...What if someone burned down the entire lab?"

"Then they'll find some other place to do these games," Mike replied, "They have enough money to build a completely new facility for that."

"How do you know that?" Will pressed. He was trying his hardest to stay hopeful at a time like this.

"Cause the money it takes to build one of those buildings is probably nothing compared to what people pay them to do whatever experiments they do."

"I guess," Will shrugged. It was common knowledge that Hawkins Laboratory has had the largest stronghold in scientific innovation in the entire country ever since the 50's. They often earned huge sums of money from other countries around the world to conduct their experiments. Once the ethics behind their experiments came into question, they went on to use some of the string of money they earned to persuade politicians not to stop or even investigate their possible criminal activity.

It was also common knowledge that the annual 'Hunger Games' that Hawkins started was treated as 'punishment' for people daring to rebel against their own government and as an excuse for the laboratory to conduct even more experiments.

"We could run away, away from all of this," Will suddenly blurted

out, “You think they’d ever catch us?”

“Definitely; they don’t allow people to move out of this state anymore, for obvious reasons. There’s no way we’d be able to make it out of here,” Mike said, resisting the urge to chuckle at his friend’s sudden persistent attitude. Will was a naturally reserved person, even when it was just Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and him. But when he was alone with Mike, he was able to come out of his shell and be more himself – that included his propensity to ask questions all the time. Although Mike didn’t realize it yet, Will was thankful Mike was such an easy person to talk to.

“Come on, Mike; you’re being so pessimistic,” Will sighed, “I’m sure people have done it before...and no one ever suspected them. It could just be you, me, Dustin, Lucas, all of our families; they can come with us too.”

“We could seek refuge in Colorado!”

That was when Mike burst into laughter. He didn’t really know why Will made him react the way he did, but the way he blurted out that last sentence was strangely adorable. He immediately dismissed those sudden thoughts.

“What? What’s so funny?” Will asked, becoming flustered. He wondered if he said something wrong.

“Why Colorado? That’s like several states away from here,” Mike replied, his smile not ceasing.

“...I...I don’t know, they’d never find us if we went far enough. Plus Colorado isn’t too bad; I’ve always had a soft spot for that state,” Will said, his sudden nervousness lingering.

It was quiet between the two until Mike broke the silence.

“What took you guys so long? Will has to leave soon!”

Ahead of them, Will could see Dustin and Lucas on their bikes.

“Ask Dustin!” Lucas retorted, before coming to a stop.

"I told you! I had to give Mews a bath and then feed her!"

"Couldn't your mom do that??" Lucas asked, clearly exasperated at this point, he then gestured with his index finger and thumb, "I was *this* close to coming here without you!"

"She really needed my help!" Dustin exclaimed, causing Lucas to roll his eyes, "...And I keep asking you Mike, why did you make us come all the way here? We could have saved a lot of time if we just came to your house."

"Yeah it feels weird coming here on this very day...especially after what happened exactly a year ago in this exact place," Lucas added, referring to the boy who committed suicide after being chosen as a tribute, "Why's your house such a bad idea?"

"Fine, I'll tell you," Mike replied, clearly looking ashamed, "I yelled at my parents and said some bad things to them before storming out of the house. It'd be awkward if I went back in and then invited all of you."

"Oh, jeez," Lucas muttered as he rolled his eyes, not convinced that was a good enough reason.

"So let's say one of us is really unlucky and then gets picked, what do we do exactly?" Dustin asked, trying to get on board the topic that the four came here to speak about in the first place.

There was an uncomfortable silence between the four. They hoped that it would never come to this point, where either of them had to ask that question, but it was inevitable. Their time had come, all four of them turned fourteen before this day so their names were in the draw to be picked as a tribute.

"Are people allowed to volunteer in place of someone who gets picked?" Will spoke up.

"No, they stopped that ages ago," Lucas replied, "If you're chosen, you're chosen. No one can take your place."

"Oh..." Will solemnly said, his voice quiet.

“Have you guys heard of Project MKUltra?”

The three looked at the direction of Mike.

“Yeah,” Dustin replied, “Isn’t that the thing started by the CIA to develop mind control abilities in people – and then use them as weapons against enemies?”

“Wasn’t that dismissed as some sort of conspiracy theory before a huge rebellion was started against the government and everyone responsible for that Project?” Lucas asked, “Like after that, weren’t the horrible conditions they subject the people they experiment on revealed?”

“It still sort of is considered a conspiracy by many people, the government convinced everyone that those were just conspiracy theories made up by people who had ulterior motives against people they politically clashed with,” Mike said, “They’re good at covering up what they do.”

“Okay so why aren’t people able to connect that with the ‘games’ that started as a result of all of this and see how entirely screwed up this is?? ...that maybe Hawkins- the government really has a lot more to hide than we give them credit for!”

“I’m pretty sure most people are able to put two and two together,” Dustin replied to Lucas, “They just don’t say anything cause they’re afraid of what will happen to them if they speak out against it or try to put a stop to it.”

“This is so fucked,” Lucas mumbled, not able to say anymore.

“Tell me about it,” Dustin added.

“If we really want to put a stop to these games, we’re going to have to uncover a lot more than what the last rebellion did 10 years ago,” Mike said.

“That means digging even more into MKUltra,” Dustin added.

“Exactly,” Mike agreed. Will looked towards Mike, wondering where this sudden determination of his came from. It wasn’t like they had

any idea how to systematically destroy the people who control the Hawkins Lab. They were all just a bunch of 14 year old kids who barely started high school.

“and how the hell are we supposed to do that-”

“Well, well, well...look who it is,” A voice interrupted Dustin, “Frogface, Toothless, Midnight, and Fairy-Byers!”

“...you’ve got to be shitting me,” Dustin mumbled under his breath once he saw the two people who routinely tormented and bullied him and his friends in school. This was the day they needed to see them the least.

Troy alongside James often took pleasure in ridiculing the four as they stood out among the other students they went to school with. While Mike, Dustin, and Lucas were regularly bullied by both on almost a daily basis, Will got the brunt of it all. Will’s vulnerable and shy personality as well as his interests allowed them to single him out and taunt him the most. They often threw homophobic slurs and nicknames at the boy which didn’t help at all.

“Thanks to Fairy over there, I got suspended for two weeks!” Troy continued, walking closer to the four, James behind him. On impulse, Mike went in front of Will.

“Tell us what you did,” James added, him and Troy trying to keep an eye on Will as the short boy stood behind Mike.

“Don’t talk to him,” Mike interrupted, thankful that his voice wasn’t shaky. Over the last two years, Mike had learned to stand his ground instead of crumbling down and letting Troy push him. He was still getting the hang of it, but he improved a lot when it came to standing up to bullies. This led to him naturally wanting to protect Will. He didn’t want anything bad to happen to him, ever – especially not by those two mouth breathers. Plus, the disgusting words that they would call Will enraged Mike.

“He ratted on me to Mr. Clarke who told the principle who then suspended me and told my father,” Troy said, “Y’know how my father is, right Byers?”

Will didn't respond, he unconsciously hid himself behind Mike even more if that was possible.

"He gave me two new scars on my back, both bigger than the last one," Troy seethed, "You guys and your fag-friend are fucking dead for putting me through this."

"If you want to hurt Will, you're going to have to get through the three of us," Lucas exclaimed.

When Troy was about to say something, the jarring sound of a sonic horn interrupted them all.

Will grimaced and covered his ears, the sudden noise startling him. The horn was probably a couple miles away from them, but the noise was so loud it felt like it was right next to their ears. The noise kept repeating itself.

The six boys immediately knew what this meant.

It was time for the entirety of Hawkins to go to the courtyard downtown for the five tributes to be selected.

Notes for the Chapter:

So next chapter is when stuff really starts to go down so I'm gonna get to that since I have plenty of time to write atm.

P.S: Who wants to guess who the other three tributes will be??

3. The Five Tributes

Notes for the Chapter:

SO IT BEGINS!

As the name says, we all know what this chapter has in store for us. ;) (this was much longer than i thought it would be lmao)

“M-my mom’s going to kill me...she’s going to kill me.”

In a rather haste fashion, the four boys left the quarry on their bikes the minute they heard that familiar repetitive siren-like noise. Lucas and Dustin were postulating a safe place they could leave their bikes so they could easily find them after this whole ordeal was over. Will, on the other hand, was on the edge of freaking out – at the fact he promised his mom he’d be back home before they all would be called to the courtyard. Instead, he completely lost track of time.

“Do you think she’s still home? I can still go-”

“For the tenth time Will, there’s guards all over the place. They won’t let you go back to your house until they’re done calling the tributes,” Dustin interrupted, becoming agitated with his friend’s panicking. He had been like this ever since they left that quarry, “and I’m pretty sure they forced your mom and brother out of the house even if they tried waiting for you.”

“Blame Troy, if he and his friend didn’t waste our time, Will probably would have made it home before 12,” Lucas retorted, “They probably knew where we were going and followed us.”

Will didn’t say anything, instead he drowned out their voices and thought about all the worst possible case scenarios that could happen as a result of his carelessness. He knew his mother wanted to be with him and Jonathan at all times on this day; what if he on the slim chance became one of the five tributes? His mother and Jonathan would only have minutes to say goodbye to him before he was sent to participate in a game where he would most likely be killed minutes

after it started. That would be the last time he'd ever get to see his mom-

"Hey! We can leave our bikes here!" Lucas waved to the other three, interrupting Will's disturbing thoughts.

They looked back and saw Lucas point to a large groove covered with fallen leaves from the trees above them.

"No one's going to find them here," He added.

The four carefully set their bikes in the groove before they partially veiled them with the piles of leaves that covered the forest floor.

In a matter of seconds, they could hear numerous fast-paced footsteps pressing against the leaves. Mike squinted his eyes before he barely made out people in combat uniforms. They had large rifles strapped around their backs as they walked at a fast pace; they were clearly alert, trying to scope out people who were loitering, rather than making their way to the courtyard.

"Are those...?"

"Mike!"

Will interrupted his friend and immediately pulled the taller boy towards him so he would be out of sight. The two hid behind a large tree while Lucas and Dustin hid behind another next to them. Will bit his lip, barely peeking from the trunk.

"Shit, these cockroaches are everywhere all of a sudden," Dustin whispered, referring to the men in uniform. Those men often goaded people into going to the courtyard at a faster pace, prodding and pointing their guns at them as if they were cattle. On an average day, the guard-men were everywhere around Hawkins, standing like cold statues. They made sure no one did anything foolish – like escaping the town. But on this special day, there were myriads of them who doubled down on anything they deemed suspicious. This included four teenage boys who were hiding their bikes in a large groove in the middle of the forest.

"We should get going..." Lucas said, once he made sure there were

no sign of those men in uniform in the particular area they were in.

“Yeah, before more of them come,” Dustin added.

Through a shortcut, the forest eventually cleared out, an array buildings and roads replacing the thick layer of trees. Not too far from them, there were crowds of people walking in unison to the same destination – the courtyard. Since the four were perched on top of a hill that marked the end of the forest, they had a clear view of just how many people there were in Hawkins.

Will’s heartbeat rose, there had to be hundreds of people within those crowds. There was no way he was going to find his family.

As they made their way down the hill, they all noticed how quiet it was. The stores people usually worked in were empty and the roads were completely cleared and devoid of vehicles. Instead, military vehicles were all over the premise. People barely uttered much at all; only a few quiet murmurs and the shuffles of footsteps could be heard throughout the crowd. It was a stiff atmosphere, for apparent reasons.

More guard-men surrounded the crowds, hands tight on their rifles.

“Hurry it up!” One of them yelled as the four walked within earshot of him.

Will absently stood closer to Mike as they increased their pace; they both were behind Lucas and Dustin. He noticed a mother trying her best to comfort her teenage daughter who looked as if he was trying to hold back her tears. She looked scared beyond belief.

The regret Will had grew stronger by the second; he should have listened to his mother and stayed home. None of this would have happened if he did. But there was no way he would get picked...Jonathan never got chosen in the previous years he was eligible. It was an extremely small chance for any single person to become a tribute.

“Come on Will, we have to go this way.”

“Huh?” His eyes widened, snapping out of it. He didn’t realize he

completely stopped as he was absorbed in his own thoughts. Will saw Mike ahead of him; he stopped as well when he realized Will wasn't budging.

In front of him, Will could see the uniformed men motion all eligible tributes, or all people between the ages of 14 to 21, to branch out from the crowd and into a separate area. Will immediately resumed a quick pace, catching up to Mike and the others.

That was when his heartbeat rose several notches as his face paled.

He stopped again.

In front of them, he saw a several women in labcoats who sat behind a long desk. Beside each of them, a box of finger prick needles were situated on the table. As someone approached the table, they extended their arm with their hands in plain view before one of the women pricked their index finger with the needle. Their index finger was immediately pressed on a smooth surface before the bloodied fingerprint was scanned.

"I...I can't," Will barely whispered. How he hated needles.

Will often got sick as a child which meant frequent visits to the hospital. He remembered mentally preparing himself for the blood tests he would get. However, that didn't help as those always ended up with him having to be physically restrained by the nurses so he could sit still before they could get the needle in his arm. It was traumatizing for him each and every time.

Mike could see Will on the verge of hyperventilating.

"It's going to be okay, Will," Mike reassured, placing his hand on Will's shoulder, "It's just a small prick; it'll only take under a second."

Will feverently shook his head, suddenly unable to form words. It felt like a huge knot formed in his throat; his eyes were also watery. He remembered Jonathan telling him that everyone eligible had to have their fingerprints scanned to for record-keeping so he knew that this was bound to happen - Will just never thought about this moment until now.

“What’s wrong with Will??” Lucas said, causing Dustin to stop.

“He’s afraid of needles,” Mike replied, “I thought you knew that.”

“I do-”

“Next!” One of the labcoats interrupted Lucas.

“Shit,” He mumbled before motioning Dustin to follow him so they could get their fingers pricked.

Mike refocused his attention on Will, he hadn’t noticed how tight Will’s hand clutched his own as he kept it on the shorter boy’s shoulder, “It’s not gonna hurt much, okay? I’ll be with you this entire time.”

“O...okay,” Will nodded, blinking his eyes. He had to get moving, he couldn’t stand in one place forever.

As they both approached the desk, Mike kept his arm around Will’s shoulders in case they would be forcibly separated. Will hesitantly extended his arm as he looked away, not realizing his hand was shaking the entire time. The woman behind the desk firmly kept his hand still before pricking his index finger and pressing it down on the surface where they took finger prints. She scanned the finger print.

Will looked up at Mike, a wave of relief washing over his face.

“See? That wasn’t too bad, was it?” Mike said. Will simply nodded in response.

After Mike got his finger pricked, they finally followed the crowd of 14 to 21 year olds towards the courtyard. Will’s sudden feeling of relief was overtaken by his initial fear. He and the other three kept a close proximity together as the crowd became more saturated. Around the periphery of the large courtyard, they could see the other people who weren’t eligible to be chosen as tributes. Most of them were both adolescents and children who were too young to participate and their parents. Will tried his best to peer over the crowds to see if he could find his mother, but he had no luck. The tight crowds and his short stature prevented him from seeing much in the first place.

Last year and the years before that, when it was him standing in the periphery alongside his mother while his brother was the only one in his family of the age to be qualified – he frequently wondered how the courtyard could fit so many people at once. His question was answered as he noticed that he was literally sandwiched against his friends.

When the people ahead of them slowly came to stop, Will tiptoed to see what the matter was.

“What’s going on?” He asked; he could barely make out a stage with a microphone stand that stood in front of the courtyard. However, he could easily see a giant blank screen that hung over behind the stage. Mike, on the other hand, additionally saw five moderately-sized glass balls, all adjacent to each other. Within each glass ball, strips of paper filled them. Those must have been all of the names.

“I think they’re about to start,” Dustin replied when he noticed a woman in her middle-ages walk up on the stage via the side-step entrance. Her camel colored three-inch heels alongside the cashmere coat she wore marked her sophisticated appearance alongside her side-swept chin-length hair.

When she reached the center of the stage, she tapped the microphone before she spoke. All eyes were immediately on her.

“Welcome, Hawkins,” She began, in what seemed to be a friendly, inviting voice, “Welcome to the tenth annual Hunger Games!”

This woman was widely known as Connie Frazier; she worked as an agent who was tied to the department of energy, the DOE being the real culprit behind the inception of these games. Many people knew of her to be a cold, calculating woman who probably had no sympathy left in her. Her friendly-demeanor she put on was all an act.

“Now before we choose our five tributes, the video we’re about to show gives us a backstory on how all of this started,” She continued, as someone behind her pulled up a video projector, “It would be advisable for you all to listen closely.”

She motioned the person to begin the video which was projected onto the blank screen. While almost everyone had their eyes glued onto it, Mike drowned it out. They played the same video every year, he knew it was all baseless propaganda on how these games were created for the greater good of society. It framed the rebellion against the department of energy and Hawkins lab as a huge mistake and 'an example of what the lowest form of humanity had to provide'. Sadly, many people – like his parents - ate it all up even if they were aware of and against the inherently cruel nature of the games.

People whose faith in their own government dwindled as a result of the rebellion knew that these games were created by the department of energy and conducted by Hawkins Lab as a way to remind people that they were in charge. Every year, the town of Hawkins and five other cities in Indiana chosen by random were chosen to participate in said games. A total of 30 tributes were placed in what people speculate to be an 'alternate dimension' parallel to the human world to fight to the death until one remains.

When the games first came to national attention in 1974, people have attempted to move out of Indiana. As a result of this, individuals and families weren't allowed to sell their homes or move out of the state and the respective cities and towns they lived in. Strong tabs were kept on each and every person who lived in the state for this reason and many others. If people tried to further rebel or hold them accountable, they would double down on their control and make things even worse, especially for those who initiate any kind of perceived uprising.

The money that Hawkins Lab made and funneled to authority figures made it all the more impossible for anyone to put a stop to the games.

After the three minute video had finished, a heavy silence filled the crowd. It was like this every year. An understandably tense atmosphere was a given as the names were to be about to be called.

"There's no reason to be so gloomy, you all know the tributes will be taken care of with luxuries that are unattainable to the average person," Frazier said, a smile on her face. She referred to the first-class treatment they would bestow upon the tributes days before the

actual game started. Essentials like transportation, food, and bedding would be of optimal quality for all the tributes during their last few days alive – at least for 29 of them.

“Never seen someone with such a shit-eating grin before,” Dustin said; his statement coming out louder than planned, especially when everyone else among them was silent.

“Shh!” Lucas nervously said, not wanting to bring any unwanted attention to them.

Dustin silently mocked Lucas’ ‘shh-ing’ motion, earning an eye-roll from him.

That was when Frazier walked up to the first glass-ball, ready to announcement the name of the first tribute. Will could feel his heartbeat begin to rise as sweat formed on the palms of his hands. He wasn’t alone in his nervousness; his friends also shared the same sudden uneasiness.

Will wasn’t just nervous for himself, he was nervous for Jonathan, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and any other person who had the misfortune of being a tribute, a tribute who was most likely never going to come back home to their family.

Frazier dipped her hand inside the glass-ball; after digging around a bit, she pulled up a slip. She slowly unfolded it, resisting the urge to smile out of anticipation. It seemed as if she was taunting the audience.

She opened it.

“James N. Wilson!”

The four boys immediately recognized who that was. He was one of the school bullies who possibly followed them to the quarry this morning. There was complete utter silence except for the slow, hesitant footsteps belonging to James. The normally intimidating boy had a petrified look to him, his face was pale as everyone watched him ascend the steps onto the stage. Will and the others had never seen him look like that before.

“Congratulations, James.” Connie offered to shake his hand.

James couldn’t say anything as he limply shook her hand. He simply stood on the edge of the steps until Frazier motioned him to stand against the large screen.

Connie Frazier walked over to the second glass-ball and picked up a second slip.

“Maxine Mayfield!”

A girl who looked to be the same age as James – and therefore the same age as Will, Mike, Lucas, and Dustin emerged from the crowd. She had long red hair and pale skin with a tomboyish appearance – a plain red sweater and boot-cut jeans that were ripped at the ends. The four boys also knew of her – as Lucas shared several classes with ‘Maxine’. It was common knowledge among Will, Dustin, and Mike that Lucas had a crush on the girl but he was barely acquaintances with her. She was intimidating and that was made clear in the way she walked up on that stage. Unlike James, she wasn’t as blank-faced or nervous, in fact, she looked livid.

When Frazier extended her arm for a handshake, Maxine briefly glared at the woman before ignoring her gesture. She walked over to the front of the screen where she stood beside James.

Frazier simply chuckled and dropped her extended arm beside her, “I guess it’s understandable that some of us might be angry at this predicament.”

The mocking tone in her voice was too hard to ignore.

Frazier picked up the third slip from the third glass-ball and unfolded it.

“...Another one,” She quickly mumbled to herself before announcing the name.

“Troy Miller!”

Mike, Will, Lucas, and Dustin looked at each other. That was third person who went to their school who was called as a tribute.

“...No way,” Lucas whispered, “This can’t be a coincidence, can it?”

The other three were silence before they watched Troy walk up the stage. They had no idea what to think at the moment. James looked at his friend; they were both clearly confused at this realization.

After shaking Troy’s hand and escorting him next to Maxine, Frazier picked up the fourth slip.

Will looked downwards, staring at the ground. A wave of nausea suddenly hit him. He wanted this to be over; he wanted to go home. He wanted to be reunited with his mom and brother and fervently tell them how sorry he was for not originally going with them to the courtyard. He felt Mike put a comforting hand on his shoulder, as he did earlier.

Will looked at his friend. With that, Mike could read all of it his eyes.

He knew just how distressed Will was; he, too, wanted all of this to be over. He wanted to tell Will everything would be alright, but the words couldn’t come out. Not when the next tribute was about to be called-

“Mike Wheeler!”

Will no longer felt Mike’s hand on his shoulder.

Dustin and Lucas were completely still, shock upon both their faces. Mike looked back at them, not knowing what to say. Will’s heartbeat became frantic, he tried uttering Mike’s name, but he couldn’t. His breath was hitched, it was as if his brain had a million words to say at once, but his mouth wouldn’t budge.

“...Mike you can’t go up there,” Dustin heard himself say.

Mike hesitated for a bit, looking at the other three, “I can’t stay here either.”

He looked towards the stage where Frazier was waiting; he also saw the crowds of people aimlessly looking around for which part of the crowd the next tribute would emerge from. That was when Mike gave Dustin and Lucas quick but firm hugs. When he reached Will, he gave

his friend a tight hug; Will tightly hugged him back before they reluctantly let go of each other.

There was no way the three of them could accept this. They felt as if they had to do something, but they knew that they couldn't. If they tried anything funny, they would have been easily caught by several of the uniformed guards who kept a close watch on the crowd.

They watched as Mike went up the stage, a startled look etched across his face.

He was terrified.

This can't be the last time I'll ever see him. Those words kept echoing in Will's head. That long hug didn't suffice as a proper goodbye. He felt like throwing up.

Frazier shook Mike's hand before sending him next to Troy. The two boys briefly glanced at each other before looking ahead towards the crowd. Mike scanned the crowd and the periphery to see if he could find his sister and parents but he had no luck.

"Next is our fifth and final tribute of Hawkins," Frazier said.

She slowly reached into the fifth glass-ball, swirling her hand within the sheets of paper. After a full ten seconds, she pulled out a sheet of paper. By now, they had noticed a strange pattern in the types of tributes being called. They all were the same age...and they all went to Hawkins high.

Before Lucas could further make a comment about this, Frazier was about ready to call the last name.

"Our final tribute for the 10th annual Hunger Games is..." She began.

"Will Byers."

It felt as if time suddenly stopped.

Will felt like he was dissociating, the shocked voices from Dustin and Lucas were muffled. His heartbeat was as rapid as ever and his eyesight was momentarily blurred. He felt warm all over. He couldn't move.

This couldn't be happening. First his best friend gets called up, now this. It was unreal and it awfully bizarre.

He was almost convinced that all of this was a horrible dream and that he was actually asleep in his bed at this very moment with his mother and Jonathan in the kitchen frantically getting ready for their workdays-

"Come on, don't be shy!"

Connie Frazier's fake, saccharine voice snapped him out of it.

Will took his first step. The crowds of people moved out of his way as he nervously made his way towards the stage. His hands shook and his legs felt wobbly. He felt lightheaded and almost dizzy as he took stiff steps. He didn't focus on the people watching him or his periphery; he kept his eyes locked on the stage. He could see Mike keep his eyes on him this entire time, Will looked up at him – their stares at each other speaking a thousand words.

"Will! Will!"

Will suddenly stopped before he reached the edge of the stage steps.

He looked behind him and saw his mother, not too far from the stage. She was previously at the periphery of the courtyard before she pushed through the crowds ahead of her. Some more people instinctively moved out of the way as she tried reaching her son. Before she could take another step, she felt hands of uniformed guards grab onto her.

"Don't go up there!" She shouted, she tried wringing herself free from the men who kept a tight hold onto her, "Let go of me!"

Will's eyes widened, he wanted to yell at those men to let go of his mom. However, he was still in shock, he couldn't speak.

When he took one step towards the direction of his mom, the guards began dragging her away from the edge of the stage.

"You can't put my son in that game! You can't do this to him!" Will could hear her yell as they took her towards the periphery.

"...M-mom."

His voice barely came above a whisper. He continued to stare ahead the direction the men took his mom away. Will felt like a coward, he had no idea what these people were capable of doing to his own mother, yet he could barely muster a word when they inhumanely dragged her away. It was times like this when he hated his soft-spoken nature.

Will looked at Frazier who urged him to get up on the steps, her signature disingenuous smile framing her features. He looked back and saw more of the uniformed men at the side of the stage.

He hesitantly took the steps, almost tripping on the third one before he made it on the stage.

"Will Byers, right?" She said, extending her hand. She used her other hand to hold the microphone in front of Will's mouth, signaling him to answer.

"Y-yes," Will stuttered, his voice weak; his hand trembled as he took her handshake.

"I'm guessing that was that your mother," Frazier continued, referring to the woman who tried to stop her son from walking up those steps, "She seems like a fiery spirit. You're lucky to have one like her."

Will didn't say anything.

Frazier guided him to stand next to the other four tributes. He stood next to Mike, unable to look at the taller male in the eye for some reason. He still had a lot to take in after what just happened. First he

had to process the fact that he was going to be thrown into a game with four of his other schoolmates where they're forced to ruthlessly kill each other.

He only had a few days to live.

He only had what could possibly be a few minutes to say goodbye to his brother, his mom – if they would let her, and his friends.

“Why don't we give our five newest tributes a round of applause?” Frazier said; scattered but reluctant claps throughout the crowd ahead could be heard. It didn't feel right to applaud the eventual death of five people, if none of them won.

“Happy Hunger Games and may the odds be ever in your favor!”

It was now that Will was certain he couldn't wake himself up from this nightmare.

Notes for the Chapter:

I had so much fun writing this particular chapter and the individual reactions that each character had in response to this whole deal. Also, the reason why those particular five tributes were picked will be addressed much later in the story; Dustin and Lucas play a big role in the coming chapters (as written in the description). That's all I can say for now. I hoped you all enjoyed this chapter! Chapter 4 will be out soon since it's going to be shorter than this one, I think.

P.S: Since Troy and James don't have known last names in canon, I had to make up last names for both of them.

4. Is This Goodbye?

A door suddenly opened.

“Will!”

Will who had been sitting alone in a table turned around and saw his mother. Jonathan was behind her. Two guards stood behind them, waiting for the family to say what could be their final goodbyes to each other.

“M-mom!” He cried.

Will immediately got off of his chair and ran towards his mom as she did the same. He buried his face above her shoulder, hugging her tight. She instantly hugged him back, tighter than he did – if that was possible. He had no idea what came over him as tears suddenly began spilling down his cheeks.

“I’m so sorry!” Will sobbed, his tears clouding his vision, “I-I shouldn’t have left; I should have stayed home with you guys! I’m s-so sorry!”

Will’s sobs were shaky; it felt like he was suffocating with each breath he took. He was surprised at his sudden breakdown, especially since he stood like an unmoving statue with a blank expression, moments ago in the courtyard. Maybe he had been holding back these emotions all this time before they’d suddenly come out like an avalanche.

After all five tributes were called, Will and the other four were separated into different rooms of a court building that stood a few blocks away from the courtyard. This was where the tributes were sent every year to say goodbye to family and friends.

When Will’s cries weren’t as intense, his mother held him by the shoulders, signifying him to look her in the eyes.

“Will, you have to listen to me,” His mother began, not a tear from her in sight – she was on the verge of crying, though, but she knew

she couldn't. She knew that would mess up her son's psyche even more. Will's mother looked behind her and saw the guards feet away from her, unmoving from their spot next to the door. It was a reminder that she only had a few minutes to say what she was about to say.

Will wiped stray tears from his cheeks as he sniffed his nose.

"...Are you mad at me?" He managed to say, after he was reminded of himself unmoving and only able to barely utter a word as the guards took his mom away.

"No, no I'm not," His mom shook her head, "I'm not mad at you. Do you understand? None of this is your fault."

Will nodded his head; he was too hard on himself sometimes.

"I'm going to do whatever it takes to put an end to these games; I swear this is the last year they're going to do any of this," She continued, keeping her voice low.

Jonathan nodded, "We're going to try everything we can."

"Yes, so all I need you – you and Mike - to do is to stay safe. Can you do that for me?" Joyce added.

"I- I'm not sur- what- what about the people who are playing this game for real?" Will replied, trying to gather his thoughts together.

"That's exactly why I need you guys to stay safe," She confirmed, "The people who are playing this game to win are going to do whatever it takes; they won't hesitate to kill others."

Will felt his stomach lurch at that realization.

If he ever came into contact with someone in the game who was there to win, he quickly assumed he would die for sure. Will had very poor physical strength, he wasn't capable of hurting anybody to that proximity.

"What if someone tries-"

“Then you run as fast as you can,” His mom interrupted, knowing what he was about to ask. Will, on the other hand, could run fast. He had that advantage.

“Ok,” Will nodded, he looked up to his older brother who enveloped him in a hug. He hugged his brother back.

“If whatever plan you guys come up with doesn’t work...then-”

“Don’t say that, Will; it will work,” Jonathan interrupted his younger brother, not wanting him to finish his sentence as he knew what he was about to say, “You’ll be back home before you know it.”

After a brief moment of silence, the three shared a group hug.

“I love you Mom; I love you Jonathan,” Will said, muffled in-between them. He felt Jonathan ruffle his neatly trimmed bowl cut.

After their goodbyes, the guards signified that it was time for Joyce and Jonathan to leave. Will watched them as they were escorted out of the room – Joyce rather walking out on her own, she wouldn’t let any of those guards put a hand on her again.

In just a few minutes, the door opened again.

This time it was Dustin and Lucas who entered the room. They instantaneously hugged Will, causing him to tip backwards.

“Guys! Guys! I’m going to fall!” The short boy cried, trying to catch his balance.

“How the hell did they manage call you AND Mike out of hundreds??” Dustin exclaimed, after him and Lucas broke the hug, “No- scratch that, how did they get James and Troy too?”

“Yeah, we tried speaking to Mike and he was just as confused as us,” Lucas added.

Dustin straightened his hat, trying to recollect the dozens of thoughts he had spiraling in his head all at once. There was no time to panic as they would be dragged out of the room if they took longer than five minutes. That was the time he and Lucas had to speak to Mike.

“We told Mike we weren’t going to give up on him, on you both; we’re going to get to the bottom of this,” Dustin said.

Will nodded his head, he could feel a bit of relief lingering on the fringe of his emotions – however, it was still masked by his fear over what could come next.

“My-my mom also said she and Jonathan were going to do something too,” The brown haired boy replied; his voice became quiet, “... something to get us out of the game.”

Dustin and Lucas both looked at each other, as if they were communicating nonverbally to each other. Will looked at them questioningly; he could have sworn that these two had some sort of telepathic communication ability that he and Mike were unaware of. They both looked back at Will.

“Then that means we have to work together then,” Dustin said.

“What? You think she’s going to let a couple of 14 year olds help her overthrow a huge operation backed by the government?” Lucas retorted, an incredulous look to his face. He thought his friend was too optimistic for his own good.

“Yes!” Dustin exclaimed, “She’ll probably need all the help she can get. Nobody else is going to want to do this, especially with how much trouble they’ll get into if they’re caught.”

Lucas became silent; he couldn’t argue with that.

“Will, please for the love of god stay away from any possible signs of danger once you’re in that game,” Dustin continued, his voice becoming serious.

“I know, I know,” The shorter boy replied. He felt his heartbeat quicken at how distressed his friend sounded as well as the statement itself.

“Yeah, if someone tries attacking you, you have to kick their ass on all counts!” Lucas added.

“I’m not going to kill anyone!” Will exclaimed.

“...I never said to kill anybody.”

“Besides, Will isn’t exactly the fighting type. He’ll be dead before he can lay a finger on any of them,” Dustin said, referring to the other tributes.

“Way to make me feel better,” Will said, side-eyeing Dustin.

“Guys, let’s stay on topic!” Lucas said, briefly glancing at the guards who stood at the door. They probably had a couple of minutes left with their friend. He looked at Will, “You know Max goes to our school, right?”

“The ‘Maxine’ girl who was chosen?” Will replied.

“...Yes,” Lucas replied, almost cringing at the name Will referred to her as, “She hates being called that, by the way – but anyways, you guys have to stick together. I want her to get back home safe too.”

“Okay,” Will nodded. He had no problem doing that, especially since he knew how Lucas felt about her.

After a few last words, the three shared one last heartfelt hug.

“Stay safe, Will,” Dustin said.

“Yeah, we can’t lose you guys,” Lucas added.

“I will; I’ll make sure Mike does, too.”

Will stood in the premises behind the court building, guards beside him. They were waiting for transportation to take them to the train station which ultimately took them to the premises of Hawkins Lab. To his dismay, he saw no sign of Mike – he assumed he and the other tributes were taken in separate vehicles. The boy kept his line of sight solely on the ground to avoid the menacing looks of the guardsmen.

As he waited, the words his mother spoke echoed over again in his mind. He knew the extent that she would go to protect him. Will first knew of this when he finally told her about the bullying he received

at the hands of Troy and James. Him coming home with newfound bruises on his knees as a result from being tripped by Troy and him sobbing so hard that he could barely get his words out enraged her. She marched straight to his school and yelled at the principal for ignoring Will's previous complaints – she even threatened to hold the school legally liable for turning a blind eye to the bullying which went on in the school. Mr. Clarke being the only one who could convince the principal to punish Troy with a meager suspension made her all the more furious. After that, Will knew that she would go as far as to break federal law to do what she was about to do.

This meant he couldn't slip up in the slightest; one small mistake would kill him.

He couldn't let his mother or his brother down. He didn't want them to hold a funeral for him.

Will looked upwards when he saw what looked to be like a military vehicle come to a stop in front of them. The guards motioned Will to go ahead of them inside the pale brown Humvee, the doors being locked from the inside – in case he tried to escape. He sat alone in the one of the backseats as the driver was the only one who accompanied him.

He stared through the window of the vehicle as it drove away from the court building and eventually downtown of Hawkins. The ride from downtown to the train station was quick, but it felt excruciatingly long to Will. His anxiety was slowly creeping up on him the further he was away from home – it made time go unbearably slow. Will didn't realize how much shrunk himself in the backseat until someone opened the door of the vehicle, signaling him to get out.

The train station was nearly empty, except for sparse groups of people and more guards lining the platform edge. It made sense; regular civilians weren't allowed to travel outside of Hawkins so the station was closed off for them.

“Will!”

Will's eyes widened when he saw Mike at the platform edge where he

had been instructed to wait. Will suddenly ran towards him.

The shorter boy had no idea what came over him as he wrapped his arms around his friend. Mike was taken aback, but he immediately returned his hug.

“...all of this is absolute bullshit,” Will heard Mike say. His voice was scared, but there was a livid tone to it.

“I know,” Will replied, in a quiet voice. He felt Mike unconsciously tighten his hold on him.

“If...if Dustin and Lucas aren’t able to get us all out of this, what the hell are we going to do?” Mike continued.

“They will; I know they will.”

That was a half-lie. Will wasn’t completely sure, but he had to do whatever he could to comfort his best friend. He was clearly distressed and even on the verge of crying – Will could hear it in his voice. He didn’t like seeing Mike like this, ever.

After what felt like forever, the two let go of their hug. Their hands lingered on each other’s forearms until a voice interrupted them.

“Watch out frogface, fairy-byers might convert you too if you aren’t careful.”

They saw Troy walk towards them with James in-tow.

Mike’s jaw twitched. He wondered how he had the nerve to badger Will, even in this whole situation they were in...when they were all about to go into a game where they’d all possibly die. From Troy’s perspective, he was angry at that possible fate and he was angry that his dad didn’t have the audacity to say goodbye to him. He was angry that his mother strongly implied she was going to commit suicide because she assumed her only child would have no chance of winning the game. He was angry and he needed a target to subvert his anger on.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Mike fumed, coming face to face with Troy. At this point, he had enough. He had enough of all of this.

Will was taken aback by how furious his friend sounded.

“It’s what those faggots do. When you least expect it, they come out from under the covers and they turn you into one of them if you let your guard down!” Troy continued, not backing down. James could be seen behind him quietly telling him to tone it down, but Troy ignored his friend.

Mike’s hands formed into fists. The smug look on Troy’s face infuriated him.

“Don’t *ever* call him that again, you piece of shit.”

“Or what, Wheeler? What are you gonna do about it?” Troy snarled, not used to seeing Mike this resolute in his anger with him.

The two boys continued to give each other uncompromising glares as they stood opposite each other, their faces inches away. Will felt his stomach lurch at the tense silence before Troy spoke again.

“Nothing, you’re not going to do anything,” Troy continued, answering his own question, “He’s already converted you, you’re just as much of a pansy as he i-”

Troy suddenly felt his face recoil sideways. Without any time to react, he was pushed backwards. He yelped as his back collided with floor of the railway platform.

“Mike!”

Mike ignored Will’s voice before he bent over, punching Troy on the face again. Troy yelped again, the ferocity of Mike’s second punch worse than the first one. Troy immediately grabbed Mike by the arm and used his upper body strength to push Mike off of him. Once he had a better foothold, he immediately pressed his knee on Mike’s stomach, causing the darker-haired boy to grunt in pain from the sudden weight. Troy then punched Mike, back-and-forth with his left and right hand – fists clenched.

“Get off of him!” Will shouted.

Mike struggled to push Troy’s arms off as his strength paled in

comparison to his.

Will's breath hitched when he vaguely saw newfound bruises form on Mike's face. Troy however, didn't stop. As he tried wringing Mike's hands off of him, he slammed Mike's head against the floor.

Will looked to the back of him and saw a broken wooden plank that leaned against the fence enclosing the train station. Without thinking, he instantly grabbed it and brought the plank behind his back. With all his strength, he swung forwards, hitting the object across Troy's back.

Troy immediately shouted expletives from the impact, a sharp ache on his lower back. Will immediately dropped the plank, a sudden bout of fear enveloping him.

"What the fuck did you just hit me with?!" He roared, looking straight at Will. When Troy was about to march towards the petrified boy, he felt hands restraining him.

Will looked beside him and saw that guards restrained Mike as well who tried stealing another punch against Troy.

"We didn't come here to roughhouse, you guys have plenty of time to do that when the actual game starts!" One of them said.

"Don't touch me!" Mike hissed, wringing his arm away from the guard's hold. He was still fuming; he wanted to have the last hit. Will's stomach nearly lurched when he saw the discoloration of newly formed bruises on Mike's upper cheeks. His nose was noticeably red, as if a nosebleed was itching to form.

Troy grimaced, clutching the low of his back; his other hand was on his nose as he – unlike Mike – had an actual nosebleed that had to be contained.

"I swear to god, you're fucking dead Byers," Troy grunted, his glare unmoving. He had trouble moving his back without it aching immensely. He was then separated from Mike and Will by the same guard who restrained him.

Will was preoccupied with the injuries Troy inflicted on Mike until

they heard a loud train horn. He leaned forwards and saw a train at full speed coming towards them. Will was taken aback when the actual train came to a sudden stop from its fast speed, his and Mike's hair blowing back from the sudden heavy draft.

After the doorway of the train opened, the two went inside after they were told to, Will following after Mike.

"Dr. Brenner, Frazier said it all went smoothly."

A man who looked to be in his 60's sat behind a laminate desk, papers neatly stacked on either side. The front-and-center had a wooden nameplate with a golden plate attached was situated at the front-and-center of the desk, the name Dr. Martin Brenner engraved on the golden plate. A name-tag with the same name was clipped onto the man's lab coat he was currently wearing.

"Everything?" The man, Dr. Brenner inquired, a look of skepticism on his face.

"...There was a mother who attempted to grab her son after he got called as a tribute," The first person spoke again, a hint of edginess coming from his voice.

"Will Byers," He stated, recognizing the name of the last tribute who was called, "Was there a need to lie the first time?"

"I...didn't think it would matter, Dr. Brenner," The man spoke, "All five tributes are currently at the station and they're heading to the training arena."

"But it does matter, immensely," Brenner said, his voice cold, "You're supposed to report to me every detail of everything that has happened. If you miss something and we mess up because of that, I hold you accountable...and you don't want me to do that, do you?"

"No, sir," The man replied, his voice more resolute – although a twinge of edginess still lingered.

"Lucky I had someone else less incompetent than you who told me all

I needed to know,” Brenner added; he suddenly glanced at a drawing which peeked out from under a binder on his desk. The drawing consisted of two stick figures beside each other drawn with crayon, one of them noticeably taller than the other. The taller of the stick-figures had greyish hair with a long lab coat traced on its body that was easily depicted as Brenner himself. The shorter stick-figure had no hair and wore a patient gown with dotted prints all over the article of clothing.

“Have you set up the equipment for the second round of sensory deprivation tests on subject eleven?”

“We’ve finished, just a half hour ago – 2:00 P.M, to be exact,” The man replied to Dr. Brenner.

“Alright,” Dr. Brenner replied, he stood up from his desk, “Tell the others I’ll be in the sensory deprivation room.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Why do my chapters end up much longer than usual???

Eleven makes her next appearance in the next chapter, by the way! I hope you all enjoyed this one.

5. To Kill or To Be Killed

Before Mike and Will situated themselves next to each other on one of the many spacious seats in the train, they took in the exquisite interior of the long vehicle. The floor was installed with ceramic wooden tiles that looked as if they were frequently polished as chandelier shaped lights hung above them. Unlike any regular train familiar to most civilians in Hawkins, the seats were long and almost shaped like couches and spaced from each other in such a way that there would be enough leg room. Between them were square-shaped tables. Behind them was a cart that had all kinds of refreshments ranging from sparkling apple cider to dry vodka and a range of appetizer-styled snacks. Why they put alcoholic beverages and potentially underage tributes alone within the same vicinity seemed widely foolish, but it probably had to do with the fact that today could be one of the last days they'd be on this earth – so drinking whatever they pleased or eating to their hearts content would be appropriate enough before they'd be sent out to kill people...or be killed. Unfortunately, the two boys had no appetite whatsoever.

Will looked at Mike who had kept his eyes on the window beside them the entire time. He hadn't said a word to him ever since his fight with Troy, other than refusing Will's help to tend to his bruises. From there, Will knew he didn't want to be bothered as he was still angry and trying to subside those feelings. The brown-haired boy bit his lip; his friend was clearly hurting – physically and mentally – for standing up to Troy for him. He felt guilty for not being able to dismiss his friend's stubbornness and help him.

Will then noticed he and Mike were the only ones in the single passenger car that they were in. Troy, James, and Maxine must have been in different cars as they used different entrances. He didn't mind, he felt at ease when it was just Mike and him...even if Mike wasn't saying anything at the moment.

In a few minutes, the train began to move, the horn signifying its departure. Will was immediately enthralled by how fast the train managed to move in such a short span of time when they zoomed through the train station. His eyes were glued onto the blurred

landscape ahead of them through the window as the train continued at a high speed.

“Hey, can I sit here?”

Will looked up and saw long red hair; it was Maxine Mayfield. She pointed to the red ‘couch’ across from theirs. He looked at Mike who hadn’t said anything yet, as he was so used to his friend being the one to initiate any sort of conversation.

“Y-yes, sure,” Will nodded, not wanting to let the awkward silence linger.

“It was getting kind of spooky sitting in one of these train-cars by myself,” She added, her eyes widened when she noticed Mike’s numerous injuries on his face, “Those bruises of yours don’t look so good, shouldn’t you-”

Mike immediately pushed her hand away before she could touch a large purple-reddish bruise that sat above his left cheekbone.

“What are you doing?” Mike questioned her.

“I was just trying to help-”

“Well, I don’t need it,” Mike retorted, his irritation growing.

Will squirmed a little bit, his best friend could be so stubborn sometimes. He briefly glanced at Mike who continued to keep his eyes on the window.

“What’s up with him?” Max said, side-eyeing Mike before looking back at Will.

“...You didn’t see the fight earlier?” Will asked, assuming she was at the train station by the time Mike had gotten into his physical confrontation with Troy. He felt awkward bringing it up, especially in his best friend’s proximity.

“I saw it,” She replied, then changed the subject, “...Just so you know, I’m not in on this game, if that’s what you guys are thinking right now.”

"I know- I mean, my friend Lucas told us to keep you safe," Will stumbled.

"He did?" Max said, a light to her eyes. Although she had what could possibly be a few days – maybe less – before her 'impending death', as she thought, Lucas saying that brought a strange sense of comfort to her.

"Yeah; he and my other friend Dustin are going to find a way to get us out- get us all out," He continued.

"How, exactly?" She asked, an incredulous look to her face, "Are you saying that two high school freshman are able to reveal decades-old classified secrets of the government within a few days?"

Will bit his bottom lip, the sarcasm and subtle biting humor behind her voice leaving him uncomfortable. Max, on the other hand, thought her incredulity was reasonable. She knew that Hawkins National Laboratory was exceptionally guarded by the government's protection. 'If a mass-orchestrated rebellion a decade ago couldn't stop them, how could a bunch of high schoolers do the same?' she thought.

"You think this is funny?" Mike finally spoke up, not appreciating her attempt at humor.

"I'm just being realistic," Max retorted; when she saw how uncomfortable Will looked and how blatantly irritated Mike was, she dramatically lifted her hands up in surrender, "Fine, I'm sorry. I'm having a hard time believing...that this will work though. I'm just trying to keep my wit in check or else I'll go crazy from the fact that I might die in a couple of days-"

"...You do know whatever plan you guys come up with isn't going to work," An unfamiliar voice said.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

A girl with completely shaved brown hair who had previously laid on her side on what looked like a hospital stretcher immediately sat up. Once she recognized the distinct sounds of those knocks and who they came from, a newfound look of fear and dread could suddenly be seen in her brown eyes. She wasn't on edge before, but the fear came and grew, more and more every single day. The drab and pasty-white interior of the small room she was made to stay in for long durations of time added to that.

She flattened the dotted hospital gown that covered her body right before the door opened. A man wearing a lab coat entered, the girl scooted over on the bed to give him room to sit next to her.

"We're going to see how far you can go this time, Eleven," The man spoke up, straightening the tag labeled – Dr. Brenner – on his coat.

"To the bath?" The girl, referred to as Eleven, inquired.

"Yes," Dr. Brenner said, his lips curling to a smile, "You were able to locate and identify those four kids. There's a lot more you're capable of that you don't know yet – that we don't know yet."

Eleven looked downwards, he had brought up 'four kids' previously, but he never went further than that. The girl knew she was born with special telepathic and psionic powers and the types of tests they would run on her, but never the implications of those tests. It was strange; the more tests they would put her through, the more she disliked doing them.

"What's special about the four kids?" Eleven tried asking a second time. She wanted to get an answer out from him.

Dr. Brenner's smile suddenly changed to a straight expression, his eyes darkening. He quickly brought his smile back when he remembered how perceptive Eleven was of other people's emotions.

"I told you, Eleven; it's nothing you need to be worried about," The scientist said, "Now follow me, we have plenty to do today."

"...Yes, papa," She said.

Will was startled by the sudden appearance of the man who came into the passenger car they resided in as Mike blankly stared at him. The train engine wasn't too loud so it confused them as to how they didn't him opening the door to their passenger car or his steps. He had a tall, grizzly appearance and wore what looked to be like a typical Hawkins police uniform. Although he had an intimidating presence, his composure was filled with apathy and weariness; the steel hip flask he loosely held onto added to that.

"How long were you in here?" Mike was first to ask, he didn't think anyone else would come to their particular passenger car as the train looked pretty empty. Will, on the other hand almost cursed himself for letting himself talk so freely about the plan.

"Yeah, and who are you exactly?" Max added; she waited for him to answer as he stood by the passenger car door.

"The first question is none of your concern and I'm your mentor – up until the game starts," He said, earning an annoyed frown from Mike. Their initial judgements about him were right, he sounded like he would much rather be anywhere than here.

"But what's your name?" Max continued, not satisfied with the brief answer she got.

"I assure you can read the name tag on my uniform," He replied. Max nearly rolled her eyes before glancing at his uniform – the name tag read 'Jim Hopper'. She, Will, and Mike silently looked at each other for a few seconds before looking back at him.

"My purpose is to teach you guys how to survive this game," He continued, "...which would be a lot easier if the five of you were in the same room. This going back-and-forth is going to be taxing on me."

That was when he had the full attention of the other three. They watched him walk across the isle of the passenger car until he stopped at the cart of refreshments and appetizer-like foods. He

aimlessly sorted through the bottles of drinks that sat on the cart, glancing at the labels to find one with adequate alcohol content.

“Besides, your friends aren’t going to have any luck pulling you out of it,” Hopper said, glancing at one more bottle. The back of the bottle read 40% alcohol; he did a short nod of approval to himself before opening it up and carefully pouring the clear liquid in the flask he carried, “I’ve caught tributes in the past talk about having outsiders infiltrate the Hawkins Laboratory - you’re most likely wasting your time with an aimless plan when you should be more concerned with how to win this game.”

Will felt his hands shake from under the table, afraid of what this guy would do next. He quickly assumed there would be more trouble in store for them after being caught talking about Lucas’ and Dustin’s plan. The man was clearly law enforcement, he most likely had the ability to report them to higher-ups who in turn would probably do something unspeakable to them, if they even on a slim chance survived.

“How do you know our plan won’t work?” Mike said, interrupting Will’s thoughts, “You don’t even know what we’ve come up with yet.”

Will’s edginess became worse at how Mike persisted. ‘How the hell was he asking that question to an authority figure who was obviously on the side of Hawkins Lab?’ he thought. Hopper chuckled, amused at how unwavering this boy was. He saw the impatience radiate off of Mike; the guy clearly wanted answers fast. When he sat down on a seat next to the cart, he noticed the numerous bruises on Mike’s face.

“You’re going to have to give me some time- maybe several days at least to completely answer why,” The officer replied, before taking a swig of the bottle, “Did you get mauled by a tiger on the way here?”

Mike’s jaw twitched; he was quickly running out of all the patience he had left.

“...Oh my god, he’s clearly drunk,” Max whispered to Will, an exasperated tone to her voice.

Will's eyes were still on Mike. For the first time he wanted to yell at his friend and ask whether he had a death wish or not.

"So what now? You're going to tell on us or something?" Mike continued, ignoring Hopper's last question. Mike briefly wondered if he was making a huge mistake, acting so brash in front of this guy. He was often criticized by his friends, especially Lucas, for not thinking things through which ultimately got him into trouble. However, the man implying that he should just abandon all hope of the only feasible way out, angered him.

The man chuckled, shaking his head.

"No, I'm not," He said, earning surprised stares from the other three, "I don't gain anything from ratting you guys out. You guys, on the other hand, will gain a lot from taking the advice I give you."

"No thanks," Mike retorted; Max gave him a surprised glare. He was resolute in following what Dustin and Lucas has in store. Besides, he had a strong hatred for anyone who was complicit in the control that Hawkins National Laboratory had over the government; they were the last people they needed advice from.

"If you want to get killed, be my guest," Hopper shrugged. When he stood up to leave the passenger car they resided in, Max interrupted him.

"Wait!" She exclaimed, standing up, "He's just being difficult."

When Mike was about to say something, Max quickly interjected – afraid he was going to say something stupid.

"While Lucas and your other friend try to find some way to get us out, we have to survive at all costs, right? We need all the help we can get!" She said to both Mike and Will, out of earshot from Hopper. The desperation in her voice was enough to keep Mike silent.

"Come on, Mike," Will spoke up, agreeing with Max. Mike's expression softened when he saw how distressed Will looked; he was clearly upset at Mike and wanted him to stop acting so tenacious against any form of assistance.

"I haven't got all day, kid," Hopper said to Mike, pique to his voice, "Do you want my help or not?"

The dark haired boy hesitated; he hated to admit it, but Max had a point. He had no idea what the game had in store for him and the other tributes. If they went into it, completely clueless as to what they had to do to survive - they would probably be dead before Lucas' and Dustin's plan could take off.

"Okay, fine," Mike quietly said, facing downwards. His humiliation was less pronounced when he caught Will direct a short yet relieved smile at him. The younger of the two was glad his friend finally dropped his stubborn pride and came to his senses.

Max let out a sigh of relief as she sat back down.

"First thing's first, do any of you have expertise in any sort of weapon?" Hopper asked, once he had full attention of the three. To his chagrin, they were silent – waiting for the other to initiate. Mike wasn't exactly the physical type, seeing as he could barely hold himself in a fight as evidenced by the numerous bruises on his face he earned from Troy. He didn't have any luck with anything he'd consider a weapon either.

"What about you?" Hopper continued, he gestured towards Will and Mike, "...the quiet kid next to the moody one."

"M-me?" Will pointed to himself, he briefly looked at Mike who frowned at Hopper for referring to him as the 'moody one' before looking back at Hopper.

"Who else?" Hopper said, crossing his arms.

"...I can't really think of any," Will mumbled as he nervously rubbed the back of his head; he spoke up when something came to mind, "My mom has small wooden rifle though. I've used it a few times, but I'm not too good at it."

"Build off of that," Hopper answered, "If that's the only weapon you're familiar with in any capability, you start off from there and practice as much as you can until you've got the hang of it."

“But I’m not going to kill anyone,” Will said, his voice firm, “I can’t kill anyone.”

“What if someone tries killing you?”

Will paused, a knot forming in his throat. He remembered his mom saying to run as fast as he could.

“Then I can run-”

“Running alone won’t always help you,” Hopper interrupted, shaking his head, “There are a variety of weapons that people will practice with in the training arena: guns, crossbows, spears, and much more – those weapons will be offered to you all during the game and people will definitely use them.”

“...Before you can make one step, someone who’s in it to kill would have shot you to death with a high capacity magazine attached to their firearm.”

There was an uncomfortable silence between the three kids, Will’s heart racing with Hoppers last words. He knew the officer made a point; if he wanted to get back home and be reunited with his family and all of his friends, he had to do whatever it took to protect himself...even if that meant taking someone else’s life.

“Lucas, if this doesn’t work, we’re fucked...we’re so fucked.”

“Oh Jesus Dustin, you were so sure it would before they were sent off!”

After the tributes were sent off and the courtyard was cleared, the two quickly went back to the forest. As they left, they noticed the atmosphere was a lot more somber and quiet – people hiding their

relief that they or their close ones didn't get called. It was like this every year. Some either went back to work, if required by their bosses, or some went back home - all of them waiting another dreadful year until this process would happen all over again. The grave acceptance of this reality was enhanced by the stark abandonment of all hope that the games would eventually end.

Dustin ignored Lucas' retort as they both pushed bunches of leaves away from the groove they hid their bikes in. After they pulled their bikes out, they paused for a moment when they saw the remaining two bikes – the ones belonging to Mike and Will.

"I still am," Dustin finally responded, "I know Will's mom is going let us help; like I said, she'll need all the help she can get."

"No, I'm not letting you guys help me."

Dustin and Lucas looked at Joyce, dumbfounded at how quick she said that. After leaving Mike's and Will's bikes in the groove and covering them again with the leaves, they quickly rode on their bikes to the Byers' household. Dustin noisily knocked on the door, only for a confused Jonathan to answer it. Dustin, in a rather brash tone, asked for Joyce who immediately came to the front door as she could hear them from outside.

"Come on Mrs. Byers! W-we know a lot – or, or at least enough about what Hawkins Lab does," Dustin exclaimed, stumbling with his speech, "...I'm really good at the research aspect of it, me and Lucas can easily find out more about what they do and then we'll be able to ruin those guys from the inside out."

Lucas bit his bottom lip, strongly resisting the urge to do a face palm. His friend was losing his cool and his evident desperation was painful to watch.

“Go home, you guys,” Joyce looked at them, pleading in her eyes, “I’m not letting two 14 year old kids put themselves in danger like this...not after what happened to Will and Mike.”

Dustin sighed and looked at Lucas, who in return gave him an ‘I told you so’ look.

When Dustin was about to press further, Lucas interrupted him.

“Sorry, Mrs. Byers,” Lucas quickly apologized.

“It’s fine; your parents must be worried sick,” She answered, noting that the two boys told her they came straight from downtown of Hawkins, “I can let them know that you guys are okay.”

“Oh no, it’s okay,” Lucas shook his head, stepping back as he pulled Dustin with him, “We’ll be off now – sorry again!”

When Joyce was about to say more, they quickly left to their bikes, Dustin almost tripping sideways as they roughly left the yard.

When they were a fair distance away from the house, they both came to stop before Lucas spoke up again.

“I knew she would say that!” He exclaimed. He was frustrated, alright. Joyce was right, they might as well go home. There was no way they’d be able to do much as they had no feasible transportation

- which was any adult who was willing to drive them to areas that were restricted to regular civilians. Now that option was off the table, a sudden wave of bleakness filled Lucas. They promised Mike and Will they would do whatever it takes to get them out – he didn't want today to be the last day he'd see Max either. He vowed to himself he would confess his true feelings for her – if they got them out. He didn't want to lose hope, but it was quickly fading away.

“What the hell are we going to do now?”

“We're going to the library,” Dustin said.

“What?” Lucas raised his eyebrows.

“We have to get as much information as we can on Hawkins Lab – its facility,” Dustin continued, “There's no way in hell we're giving up and letting Will's mom and Jonathan do it alone. They won't be able to.”

“Then what?”

“We'll see what we do from there. The game doesn't start in three days, we still have enough time if we do this quickly,” Dustin said, his inherent optimism coming back, “We have a pretty solid background on Hawkins Lab, so that'll give us a leg up.”

“Okay, let's go then,” Lucas nodded.

“We can do this Lucas; I know we can.”

With that, the two were off to Hawkins' library.

Notes for the Chapter:

YESSSsss another one finished! All I can say is that next chapter will have a cute Byler scene, so I can't wait to get started on that lmao

P.S: I wanna know how I'm doing on my characterization of all the characters - whether they're OOC on some parts or not.

Thanks for reading this & thanks for the feedback!

6. Project MKUltra

The train ride took a quick two hours, mostly due to Hopper explaining the basics of how to survive. When they had got off the train, they were promptly transported to the outer premises of Hawkins lab. Afterwards, they were escorted to a hotel-like building. It was moderately sized with a slight curve steeping inward – which marked the entrance. Lights from the inside illuminated the high arched windows which lined up the bottom of the building. The long-winding sidewalk that led to the hotel was surrounded by artificial grass and bright antique lamp post lights that lined the entire sidewalk.

While Will and Max – Troy and James (who were kept separate from Will and Mike) had their eyes glued on the sophisticated architecture of the hotel, Mike was preoccupied with something Hopper unexpectedly said to him minutes before their train arrived. When Mike finally had Hopper to himself, he finally blurted out something that he'd been meaning to ask him since he first came into their passenger car.

“You said earlier that you had nothing to gain by ratting us out,” Mike had asked, seeing the officer seated alone in another one of the train-cars after he had told them all they needed to know for the day, “What do you mean by that?”

He waited for the man to answer – if he would at all, instead of blurting out something that was meant to be patronizing.

“What I said pretty much speaks for itself, kid,” The officer replied, “They pay me enough to do what I do – no less and no more, whether or not I do anything above and beyond my usual mentoring.”

When Mike was about to leave in a rather frustrated defeat, Hopper spoke again.

“I’ll say this again and I’ll keep saying this – your friends won’t have much luck at all trying to break you guys out,” The officer said, aware that Mike and the other two were still talking about the plan, “It’s not right that you keep your hopes up like that. You’ll be gravely disappointed

if you do.”

Mike’s jaw twitched.

“That ‘plan’ is the only thing keeping me from losing my mind right now.”

His voice was shaky. He hoped Hopper wouldn’t again mention his plan being futile, but he did.

“You might be a mentor, but that’s all you are. What would you know about breaking out of the game and how to end the people behind it for good? You’re only saying all of this because you’re on their side; it’s your job t-”

“You’re horrendously clueless,” Hopper interrupted Mike. The boy was fuming, but his feelings weren’t of any concern for Hopper.

“You want to know something? That’s the reason why I signed up for this job. For nine years, I’ve tried every plan in the book – to sabotage Hawkins Lab, the department of energy, anyone who works around them. I have much better luck than your friends because I’m an insider – I’m actually familiar with the way things work around here. Even with that, I still couldn’t make a huge enough dent on these people.”

Mike was silent, shock enveloping his face.

“That’s why I’m telling you that your friends have next to no chance of getting you guys out.”

“...So why are you still here?” Mike managed to utter out, his voice weaker. He didn’t think Hopper would tell him this much...or anything at all.

“Because I’m not stopping until these people are put down for good.”

Mike snapped out of his reverie when an attendant who worked at the hotel greeted them all. She emerged from the entrance of the hotel, her boisterous and enthusiastic personality taking them aback. She then gave them a brief tour of the area when they first stepped foot into the spacious foyer.

The five of them were taken to their separate rooms that they were to

stay in for the next three days before the game – as the following two were to be spent in the training arena. The individual hotel rooms were far from disappointing as well: each with a giant bed, a T.V, and furniture you'd see in a typical living room.

Will's loud and invasive stomach grumbles made him all the more uncomfortable. He literally hadn't eaten anything today since the scrambled eggs his brother cooked up, thanks to his non-existent appetite. He had to go get something eat; he needed all the strength he could get...and he could feel himself getting weaker by the second as he was incredibly hungry. He then decided he would go downstairs to the dining hall to get something to eat.

When Will was about to step in, he immediately stepped back when he saw Hopper and the same attendant seated in the room alone. He didn't feel like confronting them in what would result in an awkward conversation.

"You're hungry too?"

Will nearly jumped upwards when he saw Max behind him, her naturally loud voice taking him by surprise.

"No, I was going upstairs-"

The loudest rumble Will had ever heard come from his stomach stopped him from saying anymore. His face immediately turned red.

"Gosh, Will Byers, you're such a horrible liar," Max said, trying her hardest not to laugh, "Come on."

She walked passed him, motioning the flustered boy to follow her, in which he reluctantly did.

"Good evening, Will! Maxine!" The attendant said, enthusiastically waving at them; she gestured to a long table at the end of the room filled with all sorts of drinks and food, "There's plenty to last us for decades...so eat to your hearts content."

"...It's Max," She interjected, her voice annoyed. The attendant

continued her conversation with Hopper, not hearing her correction.

Will heard his stomach rumble again when he took a close look at what was on the table. In the center was a decently sized rotisserie-style turkey, some of the meat already carved off of the bird. Condiments and side dishes such as stuffed mushrooms, buttery baked potatoes, and even a plate of foie gras with brioche on the side covered the table. Bottled drinks, similar to the ones back in the train sat next to the table of food. Once Will found the stack of ceramic plates, silverware, and glass cups, he quickly helped himself to the assortment of food and drinks. Max followed after him.

“Hey, did Lucas say anything else – other than to protect me?” She spoke up.

“No, he didn’t have enough time to,” Will shook his head, “Didn’t he come say goodbye to you?”

“I think he tried, but they escorted me out before he probably could,” Max replied, a solemn tone to her voice, “At least my mom was there...shit, I miss her so much already.”

“I miss my mom too,” Will added, a wave of upset hitting him. His sudden bout of sadness was only amplified by Max’s tone, her normally intimidating presence dwindling, “...She told me that she’s also going to try to get us all out of the game – Lucas, Dustin, her, and my brother Jonathan are probably going to work together to come up with something genius.”

“She seems pretty awesome then,” Max said, noting the mother who marched up to the stage and demanded that they not put her son through this.

“She is.”

He blinked his eyes several times, trying to keep oncoming tears from falling down his face.

Max raised her eyebrows when she saw Will grab onto a clear bottle that was similar to the one Hopper took when he came inside their passenger car in the bus. He screwed it open before pouring a

generous amount in the cup he carried with him. Will had no idea what came over him, but he knew what was coming after this day. He thought that maybe this would lessen his anxieties alongside the heavy meal that he was about to eat.

“You do know that’s vodka, right?” Max asked, wondering if Will had lost it.

“I know,” Will nodded, the tone in his voice telling her not to press any further on this. He tried his best to avoid the judging look that Max was currently giving him.

There were mountains of library books and newspapers situated on Dustin’s bed as him and Lucas were quickly reading through them, both in a desperate attempt to find something - anything that was feasible to start off from. The books ranged from topics like the many government departments and agencies to Indiana’s broad history in scientific innovation while the newspapers were more specific – some covering events revolving around Hawkins National Laboratory.

How they got all these books and newspapers was due to Dustin distracting the librarian who demanded that he return the limit of five books he checked out before he could check out anymore. Lucas then insisted they go to Dustin’s house – which was further - as the former’s little sister would continuously pester them on what they were doing.

The two had been at this for a few hours – the normally talkative duo only speaking at brief times.

“Hey, you remember Mike mentioning MKUltra this morning?” Lucas spoke up.

“Yeah, but I literally couldn’t find anything on that while we were smuggling as much books as we could,” Dustin said, aggravated as it seemed they weren’t getting anywhere. The books that they read had information they were mostly familiar with...information that wouldn’t sustain on its own if they wanted to be a step ahead of Hawkins Lab.

“Look at this,” Lucas said, gesturing towards the newspaper he held onto. Dustin pushed a few books, lying on the floor out of the way to get to Lucas before grabbing the opened newspaper from his friend.

MKULTRA EXPOSED

Written in large, bold letters were those two words on the upper left-hand corner of the first page.

Beside the title was a grainy photo of five adults – one man, four women – in dotted hospital gowns. Shadowed behind them was a man in a lab uniform and beside them on the far right was another man in his middle ages with the same styled lab uniform. He carried a binder, situated below his left arm; he had a tight lipped look to his face, a dead look behind his eyes.

Dustin began reading the text aloud below the title.

“...The trust of the American people has been shaken to its core as a special inquiry into a covert CIA operation, code-named MKUltra, has exposed the extensive details about that which has been haunting the nation for the past decade. Six subjects have come forward- Lucas, this is more stuff we already know.”

“Just keep reading it!” His friend sighed.

Lucas scooted beside Dustin to get a better look at the page of the newspaper he discovered. He pointed to the bottom part of the first section.

“See? Right here, they start to talk about documents that go into detail about the horrific conditions that five patients went through, such as the drug tests,” Lucas said, “There’s also written testimony each from those patients...and this paper claims that there’s detailed evidence about the death of other patients from the conditions that the experimenters put them through.”

“It says that the documents were released,” Dustin replied, “If that’s what the rebellion had as ammo then Hawkins Lab should have been shut down long ago since they have all of this information.”

“That’s the problem; look at the next page,” Lucas said, flipping the

newspaper that Dustin held onto, “Copies of the original documents were definitely released, but quickly destroyed before they could get into the hands of the general populace and anyone who actually had the power to put a stop to all of this. That’s why the government and Hawkins Lab are able to convince lots of people that this is a whole conspiracy by detractors to ruin them.

“Everything that we just read only hold up as claims, not actual evidence. This is why the ‘games’ continue to go on – they’re able to scare people from doing any more research into this...cause they’ll continue to make it worse for us than it is right now if we do.”

“Oh my fuck...” Dustin whispered, his shoulders slouching – he could feel a sudden bout of eeriness throughout the room. He suddenly came to his senses when Lucas closed the newspaper and held it upright causing a single page to fall out.

“Woah, what’s this?” Dustin immediately snatched the page; he closely read it, “Terry Ives Suing?”

TERRY IVES SUING – ‘They took my daughter’

“After the district attorney’s office declined to press criminal charges citing lack of evidence, local resident Terry Ives is not giving up her search or justice for herself, and her daughter, and this morning filed a lawsuit against research scientist Dr. Martin Brenner and his staff...”

“Lack of evidence, of course,” Lucas sighed, he briefly glanced at the title text, “Am I reading this right or did Hawkins Lab really kidnap someone’s daughter? This whole facility keeps getting worse and I didn’t even think that could be possible.”

“Yeah...I’m pretty sure all the copies of concrete evidence for that were destroyed too,” Dustin replied.

“...Who’s this Dr. Brenner guy? I keep seeing him everywhere on this newspaper,” Lucas said, “...He sounds like a real son of a bitch.”

“He’s probably the head of the laboratory.”

There was a brief silence among the two until Dustin spoke again.

“Lucas, I have an idea!” He suddenly piped up.

“What?” He said, annoyed at Dustin’s sudden outburst.

“We’re going to find some way to get inside the lab ourselves,” Dustin said, “We need to find those documents, at all costs.”

Will could barely stand outside the door that led to Mike’s room; he tried keeping a steady balance.

‘So this is what being drunk feels like...wait, did I actually walk or did I crawl all the way here?’

Will immediately dismissed those silly thoughts. He was still as tipsy as ever; his hand was lifted up into a fist, ready to knock the door at any moment. He hesitated, trying to conjure up the right words to say to his best friend, him being drunk made it a lot more difficult than it should have been. There was also the fact that they hadn’t talked much in the train or since he got mercilessly beaten up by Troy. Will wondered if Mike’s sense of hope was almost quashed after what their mentor said about their plan or plan that they’ve yet to come up with. That’s probably why he wasn’t saying much. Will knew that Mike couldn’t leave him hanging like this, nor could he do the same.

He took a deep breath.

When he was about to finally knock on the door, a voice interrupted him.

“Will?”

Will turned around, his movements unsteady, trying his best to focus on the subject ahead of him.

“M-Mike is...that you?” He drawled. He nearly slapped himself on the face from how slurred his voice came out. He was completely out of it! He blinked several times, not realizing he was slightly losing his balance.

“Woah!” Mike exclaimed, wrapping an arm around his friend’s waist, to keep the shorter boy from falling backwards. Will’s face suddenly heated up at their close proximity and even moreso that he probably looked like an idiot in front of him. His eyes were clearly unfocused, his irises shifting back and forth and his lips parted open.

“Jesus Christ Will, how much did you drink?” He continued, crinkling his nose at the strong scent of alcohol that came from his friend. He tried his best to keep a calm composure, but it wouldn’t work. Will Byers, of all people, decided to get hammered on the day before they were to go into the training arena. It was so unlike him. It at least would make more sense if it was him being the one to drown his sorrows in alcohol while Will was the one who tried talking him out of it.

“Just two,” Will replied, trying his best to speak without a slurred tone, but failed, “I can’t really walk...so maybe three...but I managed to find your room, so two and a half?”

“...two and a half cups?” Mike clarified, his voice quiet. He still couldn’t believe Will would do such a thing to himself.

“Sure,” Will mumbled, shifting himself up by gripping Mike’s shoulder. That was when Mike realized how unusually close they still were together. However, he protectively kept his arm around Will to keep him from falling.

He opened the door to his room before Mike carefully put him on the bed. Will propped himself up on the edge of the bed as Mike sat beside him. Will aimlessly dangled his feet from the edge, trying to distract himself from what he thought would be the worst stage of his drunkenness. He felt dizzy, his line of sight was all over the place, and his apprehensive mood was coming back. It was a far cry from the early stage, where he was unusually talkative at the dining hall, spilling out his emotions on everything that went on with his family and everything else that was to happen in the future (minus the plan) – surprising Max and annoying the ever-lasting Christ out of Hopper. The officer didn’t realize how capable the usually reserved boy was of acting like that. But to a much disappointed Will, Hopper (with the much needed help of the attendant and Max) snatched his third cup of vodka away before he could finish it.

"I'm sorry for acting the way I did," Mike spoke up, after a long silence.

Will looked up at him, both his hands beside him as he nervously squeezed the edge of the mattress.

"I'm just angry at all of this, especially since it's impossible to come to terms with," He continued, unable to look Will in the eyes, "I try convincing myself that this is all some really, awful vivid dream, but it's clearly not...I'm still here."

"It's okay," Will tried to reassure him.

"I feel like such an asshole now that I think about it, you were clearly worried...and I barely said a thing to you," Mike continued, referring to his injuries he received from Troy. Now that he realized it, he wanted to beat himself up for how stressed out he made Will. He knew the type of person his best friend was – Mike knew he didn't want him to put himself in danger like that for the sake of protecting him.

"You don't have to worry about it...I can find some medicine for your cuts," Will replied, shrugging it off. He tried leaping off the bed, but Mike restrained him – pulling his friend back to his previous position.

"It won't really make a difference at this point," Mike replied, the bruises on his face weren't fresh anymore and they didn't hurt as much - whatever medicine Will was planning to find wouldn't do much. Besides, he didn't want Will to hurt himself from falling off the bed, as he was still in a state of disorient. He finally uttered his next question after a slight pause.

"...C-can you just stay with me?"

"Yeah, of course," Will nodded, taking in the sudden uneasiness that came with Mike's voice, "...I don't want to crawl back to my room."

Mike tried resisting the urge to laugh at Will's last sentence, but he instantly failed as he barely stifled a few giggles. He suddenly pictured his best friend, crawling on all fours, all the way from the dining hall through the hotel lobby and finally through the multiple

hallways where the rooms resided, hotel workers staring at him as if he was some madman. Mike then burst into peals of laughter, the image not going away. He fell back on the bed, his laughter not subsiding.

“What’s so funny?” Will blinked his eyes, he was as clueless as ever – thanks to the alcohol. He really thought his best friend was peculiar at times – however, this was the first time he genuinely smiled since this morning. He couldn’t help but to smile back, as he thought it was such a nice sight.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” Mike said, once he calmed down.

Will subconsciously laid back on the bed, beside Mike. They didn’t say a thing to each other as they both stared up at the ceiling, a comfortable silence surrounding them. After a few minutes, Will broke the silence, shifting his entire body to face Mike.

“How...how did your parents take it?”

Mike looked at Will, his eyebrows raised, “Take what?”

“You being picked and then leaving,” Will replied, his current situation preventing him from articulating himself clearly.

“I don’t know; I can’t really describe it,” Mike hesitated, Will’s penetrating stare back at him was unusual of his normally timid friend – but it was probably the alcohol doing all the work, “They-they were obviously really upset and they were scared, really scared...”

“Did they change their mind on anything?”

Mike also turned around to face Will. He knew what that question was specifically referring to – his parents’ unwavering trust and blind devotion to authority. Will thought that them being directly affected by this had to have done something.

“No,” Mike shook his head, his terse reply showing clear disappointment in his voice.

“Their goodbyes sounded like final goodbyes.”

Will's heart sank.

It made even more sense to him that Mike was acting the way he was. People around him repeatedly telling him or implying that there was nothing he could do to get out of this – and that he should just accept the fact that his death would probably come soon caused him to retreat to an angry yet terrified silence. The two continued to lay on their side, facing each other. Mike could see the hurt in Will's eyes after what he said to him. Mike suddenly felt guilty as he didn't mean for the atmosphere to get dark so fast. When he was about to place a comforting hand on the shorter boy's arm, Will immediately flopped on his back.

"My head hurts...my stomach feels funny..." He groaned, a sudden wave of nausea hitting him, "...but for some reason, I don't feel like throwing up and I really, so badly want to."

Mike's hand awkwardly hovered over Will before he placed it back beside himself.

"I mean, you didn't have to drink so much," He finally said, slightly amused from his friend's uncharacteristic actions, "I can get you water, you'll probably feel better."

Will fervently shook his head, grabbing onto Mike's sleeve as the taller boy sat up, "I already drank a lot...after they told me to stop drinking."

He vaguely remembered Max making him drink water after the cup of vodka he held onto was forcefully taken away from him.

"Mike, I'm so tired."

"Then go to sleep," He said, once again unable to look Will in the eyes. There was something so naturally endearing about him – he couldn't quite pinpoint it and it drove him crazy.

"Okay," Will simply said, his eyes half closed, "Goodnight, Mike."

"Goodnight, Will."

Eleven walked beside Brenner, him making sure she kept a slight lead so he could maintain his close watch on her. Her walking became stiff when they made their way to the sensory deprivation room. The girl looked downwards, she had changed from her usual hospital gown to what looked like a thick, sleeveless white vest. It was tight and constricted – all adding to her discomfort.

In the middle of the room, she saw the familiar tank. It was large and cylindrical shaped, encompassing enough space for one person to fit inside. It was filled to the brim with water, which was where they conducted sensory deprivation experiments on her. More lab workers stood inside the room, silently acknowledging Brenner as he and Eleven walked inside. Eleven looked upwards, noting the second floor of the circular room, more workers looked downstairs atop balconies that lined the edge. She could see more workers behind windows with sound devices, ready to listen in on what Eleven could retrieve through her amplified sensory perception.

“There’s no need to be nervous, Eleven,” Brenner said; he gestured to the many workers around them, “Just think of these people as your friends.”

Eleven slowly went up the stairs before situating herself on a platform that sat on top of it. In a matter of seconds, the platform was lowered as another worker who stood on the edge of the tank placed a bulky covering over her head.

Eleven could feel her heartrate quicken as she felt herself sink further into the tank, the water covering up to her knees, then her shoulders, and finally her entire body. It was cold. Really cold. She closed her eyes.

Through the clear tank, she could hear other workers pull the outer covering to cover the tank, making it entirely dark for her.

She opened her eyes.

She found herself alone in a completely dark void.

With each footstep she took, a ripple of water emerged from it. She amplified her concentration; remembering Brenner’s words as they

walked the hallways that led to the underground facility. He asked of her to locate the four kids again to confirm their whereabouts – she remembered the names she told Brenner.

Mike Wheeler, Will Byers, James Wilson, Troy Miller.

Ahead of her, she could see two boys of her age sitting beside a bed. Numerous books and newspapers were messily scattered on the bed and around them. It was just them within the void; she closely walked towards the area that suddenly appeared.

One of the boys had curly hair, a cap carelessly tipped sideways on top of his head. The dark-skinned boy next to him was more neatly put together, a red shirt with washed jeans – their eyes were locked on a newspaper that the boy with the cap was holding.

Luckily they couldn't see Eleven – she was only able to see them. She could clearly hear their conversation, the sound of their voices intensified and being translated to the sound devices.

“After the district attorney’s office declined to press criminal charges citing lack of evidence, local resident Terry Ives is not giving up her search or justice for herself, and her daughter, and this morning filed a lawsuit against research scientist Dr. Martin Brenner and his staff...”

Curly-haired boy.

“Lack of evidence, of course, am I reading this right or did Hawkins Lab really kidnap someone’s daughter? This whole facility keeps getting worse and I didn’t even think that could be possible.”

Red-shirt boy.

“Yeah...I’m pretty sure all the copies of concrete evidence for that were destroyed too.”

Curly-haired boy.

“...Who’s this Dr. Brenner guy? I keep seeing him everywhere on this newspaper; he sounds like a real son of a-”

Lucas and Dustin.

Oh no.

Eleven's heartbeat quickened.

She wasn't supposed to locate these two.

She suddenly crouched down, her breathing shaky – realizing the mistake she just made. She knew Brenner was going to do whatever it took to find them. She wasn't sure what the scientist would do, but she had a gut feeling it was something that would be unspeakably horrible.

Eleven squeezed her eyes shut, purposely losing her concentration. She opened them back up, seeing the lab workers re-open the covering through the tank. She could vaguely hear muffled noises of static coming from the sound devices as she ceased her amplified sensory perception.

Eleven's eyes widened.

Complete, stricken fear encased her features when saw the look on Dr. Brenner's face.

He was fuming.

"Papa!" She yelled, tears streaming down her cheeks. Tight hands from two lab workers held onto either of her arms as they dragged her. With all her strength, she tried kicking and squirming her way out of their grip, but she had no luck making them let go.

Dr. Brenner stood unmoving at the end of the hallway, watching them drag Eleven to a what looked like a prison-styled solitary room.

Every time she failed to live up to her previous potential of experiments, this was what Dr. Brenner would do to her. Depending on how 'bad' she did, her stay in solitary confinement would be longer than usual. For purposely ceasing an integral experiment, she knew Brenner would lock her up for a few hours. After the punishment was over, Brenner would tell her he was just doing what was best for her. But the more she heard that, the more she had a

hard time believing him.

Dr. Brenner knew that this forced her to do better as he was familiar with her growing fear of claustrophobic rooms.

“Papa!” Her cries became louder as she kicked and squirmed harder.

The workers threw her inside the small room.

Never again.

When she saw the door was about to close on her, which would make the entire room pitch black, she immediately stood up.

She cocked her head to the side.

The door immediately flew open, hitting both workers square in the face. Within a second, they suddenly flew backwards, roughly colliding with the wall as Eleven extended her arm. The impact knocked them out before their bodies lay limp on the floor.

That was when Eleven went out of the room. She wiped the bottom of her nose, blood staining her fingers.

She stopped when she saw Brenner ahead of her.

“Eleven!” He exclaimed, not expecting her to do what she just did.

Ignoring Brenner’s calls to her, she made a run for it. She swayed her arms, forcefully pushing Brenner aside with her telepathic ability before he could grab her.

She had no idea what she was doing, but she knew she had to get out of this place. She could hear her breathes get more panicky as she heard Brenner’s startled voice become livid. She knew there was a frightening aspect to this man, but she never fully realized it until today.

She wouldn’t let him lay a finger on her ever again.

Eleven stifled a gasp when she heard the sounds of alarms going off.

When she turned around a corner, she could see several men in uniform in front of her holding guns. The girl stood her ground and slowly lowered her head. As she felt a stream of warm blood come from both her nostrils, the lights above her flickered. She could feel herself become lightheaded, but she persisted.

The faces of the uniformed men were in shock with their body's tremoring; blood slowly emerged from their eyes. Eleven slightly cocked her head, causing the men to abruptly collapse to the ground. Their bodies made a loud impact as they collided with the floor; they lay on each other motionless.

She nearly stumbled forward as a wave of dizziness hit her. When she tried running again, she fell flat on the ground.

In a matter of seconds, she felt hands pull her up.

"...Lock her up in her room, until I tell you when to open her."

She could vaguely hear Brenner's voice before she fainted.

Notes for the Chapter:

My hands hurt so much from typing...holy wow. So much went on in this chapter and I'm so thankful I could update with this one before Christmas. I felt like I needed to get into Will's and Mike's relationship before this whole fic goes off.

Next chapter is when they get into the arena, and then the game will most likely begin in chapter eight.

I feel like I can't say anything more or else I'll spoil the following chapter/s.